

Mike Seager Thomas (ed)

WALLY'S WAR



THE WW2 NORTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN DIARIES
OF WALTER VON SCHRAMM OF THE NZ GRAVES
REGISTRATION & ENQUIRIES UNIT

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Graves Registration & Enquiries Unit

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Cautionary note

The diary presented here reflects and depicts the attitudes and personal expression of the 1940s, and includes terms for national and racial groups, which we would not use today. Some of these expressions are repeated in my commentary. It should also be noted that the photographs used to illustrate this volume include images of both military graves and cemeteries, and of unburied military dead.

MST

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Figure 72

The German war cemetery of La Mornaghia, Tunisia, in the 1960s.
“Concentrated” by the VDK to Bordj Cedria around 1974 (photo: unknown
German photographer)

POST MORTEM

NORTH AFRICA'S WWII MILITARY CEMETERIES POST WAR

Wally von Schramm died in 1980. Had they not died in the desert, most of those whose identities he and his unit registered would now be dead as well. But the campaign's cemeteries remain, UK and Dominion (Commonwealth), French, German, Italian, US, from one end of the North African littoral to other, and—if the hopes of their creators are realised—they will continue to do so *in perpetuity*. Today no doubt they are still visited by a handful of relatives, people with a direct personal connection to the campaign and for whom they are places of contemplation, but soon, when that personal connection has ceased to exist, the vast majority of visitors will be tourists, drawn by the kind of curiosity and awe that draws visitors to other, much older cemeteries and memorials to the dead. They will continue to provide a link to the past but the nature of the link, and the perception and importance of that past will be very different.³³⁷

Assuming, that is, they still exist at all.

Inevitably, the permanent alienation of useful land for war cemeteries has been controversial. In 1972, in order to accommodate urban expansion, but also certainly for political reasons, Italy was obliged by the revolutionary Government of Muammar Gaddafi to remove 20,000-odd military dead from Tripoli's Italian Military Cemetery,³³⁸ and smaller UK and Dominion cemeteries have had to be moved within Greece and within Indonesia—also at the insistence of their host countries.³³⁹ Even in France where the idea of a “*sepulture perpetuelle*” was first enshrined in land-grants by its government to its WWI allies for their war cemeteries, and where the war cemetery relates to its own history and has become an integral part of its cultural landscape, there was resistance to it.³⁴⁰ Ongoing threats to war cemeteries worldwide come from neglect, often the consequence of an inhospitable political environment in the host country; socially and politically motivated vandalism;³⁴¹ the

environment; and from “over-riding public necessity” (for airfields, new graves, reservoirs, roads, urban development), a loophole written into an “additional protocol” of the 1949 Geneva Convention covering grounds for the exhumation of war dead.³⁴² One cannot even be confident of an ongoing commitment from all those currently tasked with their maintenance. For example, when Pakistan left the Commonwealth, it also withdrew from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), despite the fact that many of the dead memorialised were Muslim southeast Asians from territories that lie within the actual and claimed boundaries of modern Pakistan.³⁴³ The future of these cemeteries therefore is by no means certain.

Meanwhile, owing to their locations outdoors, they need constant maintenance—gardens need to be tended and watered, gravestones to be cleaned and (occasionally) replaced, and associated infrastructure repaired. In theory they are also regularly visited by management and supervisory staff. All of this takes money, for the CWGC in Egypt, £600,000 annually. Its cemetery at El Alamein (Figure 73), for example, to which many of the dead curated by Wally and his unit were removed, employs four permanent staff; and in 2019/20, the roof of the memorial there was re-waterproofed,³⁴⁴ and the cemetery’s 1950s drainage channels and pump room restored.³⁴⁵ For a cemetery of its size (by area, the El Alamein cemetery is one of the CWGC’s largest), this may not seem so much, but *in perpetuity* and extrapolated across the vast number of war cemeteries at home

³³⁷ cf. Uzzell and Ballantyne, 1998

³³⁸ Formiconi, 2021, p. 165; New York Times, 1972, 5 June, p. 36

³³⁹ IWGC, 1957, pp. 7–8; CWGC, 2023b

³⁴⁰ Longworth, 1985 [2010], pp. 11–13

³⁴¹ e.g. during the post-Gaddafi Libyan civil war when UK and Dominion Forces gravestones in Benghazi were deliberately smashed by members of an Islamist militia (Al Jazeera, 2012). These graves have since been repaired (Quinn, 2023)

³⁴² Gibson and Ward, 1989, pp. 83–84; Hayes, 2002; Petrig, 2009, pp. 360–61; Rudgard, 2017

³⁴³ Longworth, 1985 [2010], p. 241

³⁴⁴ The Complete Roofing Company, 2020

³⁴⁵ CWGC, 2021, p. 22; Quinn, 2023

and abroad managed by the war graves authorities of the former combatant nations,³⁴⁶ it is a phenomenal investment, and yet one with a changing and very likely diminishing return to society over time. Can anyone but the most idealistic expect it be sustained? Of course not. Yet open discussion of this issue is taboo; and—in theory at least—the honoured dead remain forever inviolable.

Aftermath

In July 1943, only two months after the end of the North African campaign, the then Imperial War Graves Commission's (IWGC) newly appointed Principal Architect for Egypt and North Africa, Hubert Worthington, flew to the region with a brief to select 10 or fewer new permanent cemetery sites for the campaign's UK and Dominion Forces dead. These were to be readily accessible to future visitors and contain 2000 or more burials, big enough to benefit from economies of scale, but also, as Worthington wrote of the site at Sollum-Halfaya, possessed of "beauty of natural setting, and the irresistible appeal of a historic battleground".³⁴⁷ In fact, 19 were chosen.³⁴⁸ At this point, the job of graves registration was far from over, and that of concentrating graves into permanent cemeteries hardly begun, and it would be years before the Commission could begin its

³⁴⁶ The American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC)—26 war cemeteries (ABMC, n.d); the Italian *Commissariato generale per le onoranze ai caduti in guerra* (*Onorcaduti*)—eight *Sacrari Militari* and 1300 other burial grounds; the CWGC—2500 war cemeteries and cemetery plots as well as numerous individual grave sites (CWGC, 2008; Gibson and Ward, 1986, p. 63); the French *Ministère des Armées*—more than 3400 burial sites, including 275 national cemeteries (*Ministère des Armées*, n.d a); the German *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*—832 war cemeteries (VDK, 2019, p. 7)

³⁴⁷ Higginson, 1944a, p. 1; Longworth, 1985 [2010], pp. 178–179; Spark, 2009, p. 243–45; Worthington, 1943a, p. 10

³⁴⁸ El Alamein, Halfaya-Sollum, Geneifa (Feyid) and Heliopolis in Egypt; Barce or Regima (later swapped for Benghazi), Knightsbridge-Acroma, Tobruk and Tripoli in Libya; Beja, Enfidaville, Mareth, Massicault, Medjez-el-Bab, Oued Zarga, Sfax, Tabarka, Thibar Seminary in Tunisia, and Bone and Dely Ibrahim (Worthington, 1943, 2; 1943b, pp. 1–2)

work of monumentalisation on the ground. But the tiny numbers of Graves Registration Units (GRUs) that characterised the early stages of the war in the desert³⁴⁹ were at last being augmented, and by the end of 1943 there were 10 GRUs and three Graves Concentration Units (GCUs) operating in the region,³⁵⁰ which in cooperation with



Figure 73
El Alamein today
(photo: Philip
Hassan)

each other and increasingly assisted (officially, “diluted”) by Italian POWs, were reported to be making progress in both registering and concentrating the campaign’s graves.³⁵¹ The NZGREU, now under the command of Harry Overton, had meanwhile been transferred from the Western Desert to the Levant.

Progress overall was slow, however, and for a variety of reasons. Planning for El Alamein was put on hold when the Australian Army decided to concentrate its own graves *within* it.³⁵² At Barce, a designated concentration cemetery had to be abandoned when it was found to be waterlogged, and the dead already buried there moved. Likewise an early concentration cemetery established at Amiriya was later closed.³⁵³ There were endless bureaucratic and financial to-and-froings.³⁵⁴ Meanwhile outstanding individual graves, because their locations had been lost or because these were in or hedged around by minefields, were becoming increasingly difficult to find and recover.³⁵⁵ Indeed graves and bodies would continue to be recovered from the Western Desert and Tunisia long after UK and Dominion Forces had given up on them.³⁵⁶

Predictably the first cemeteries (and cemetery plots) taken over by the IWGC were in metropolitan Egypt and Tunisia.³⁵⁷ Most were relatively small, and because these areas had not seen the see-sawing that had characterised the campaign in the Western Desert, the logistics of graves concentration into them was simpler. By the end of 1945, however, registration and concentration across the theatre as a whole was reported to be complete and the majority of cemeteries

³⁴⁹ 5 GRU, 1 and 2 SA GRU, the NZGREU and, briefly, 1 Aus GRU

³⁵⁰ 21 GRU, and 10 and 25 GCU and 4 (SA) GCU in Egypt; 20, 22, 27 and 28 GRU in Cyrenaica; 24 GRU in Tripolitania; 5, 17 and 23 GRU in Tunisia; and 8 GRU in Algeria (Dixon *et al.*, 1943)

³⁵¹ Dixon *et al.*, 1943

³⁵² 20 War Graves Unit, 1945; Higginson, 1945; Peek, 1945; Worthington, 1945

³⁵³ The movement of graves from Barce is nowhere mentioned but the CWGC's Benghazi page refers to a memorial to "casualties buried in Barce War Cemetery, whose graves could not be located", while a letter from F. Higginson to H. Worthington acknowledges receipt of a concentration plan for the cemetery (1944b). That it was liable to flooding is mentioned in Worthington's original description of the site (1943a, p. 13) and in an early 1944 report on the site by the AAG, Col. S. Fraser (Higginson, 1944a, p. 1–2)

³⁵⁴ Longworth, 1985 [210], pp. 180–81

³⁵⁵ Fraser, 1944a; Spark, 2009, pp. 116–17. See also Wally's diary for 1943

³⁵⁶ e.g. Caccia-Dominioni, 1966, pp. 273, 275; IWGC, 1950, p. 31; this volume, p. 310

³⁵⁷ IWGC, 1945, p. 16; 1946a, pp. 19, 26

had been taken over, and in June the following year the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries in the Middle East (by that date subsumed under Central Mediterranean Graves Registration and Enquiries) officially ceased operations.³⁵⁸ Actual construction work on the first new cemetery in the region, Sollum-Halfaya, began in 1946 and was finished, bar the headstones, by early 1948,³⁵⁹ five years after the end of the campaign. It was followed by Knightsbridge-Acroma (1949), Tobruk, Benghazi and Heliopolis (1951), El Alamein (1954), Massicault (1955), Enfidaville (1955/56), Medjez-el-Bab (1957) etc.³⁶⁰ Read through its records from this period, and the IWGC comes over as a complacent talking-shop, but it had not in fact been idle, and prior to this final construction phase had assessed a range of plans, from sketches to final working-drawings produced by its architects, had researched materials, discussed headstones, and had written costings, tenders and contracts for the numerous cemeteries that were to become its responsibility in North Africa (and elsewhere), all of which enabled the job of construction in the field.

After a shaky start in the region,³⁶¹ the US settled upon a system similar to that of the UK and Dominions, whereby the US Graves Registration Service recorded and either repatriated (an imperative peculiar to the US and France) (**Figure 74**) or, in consultation with the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), concentrated the dead in an agreed permanent cemetery, before handing this over to the ABMC for architectural embellishment and long-term care.³⁶² None of the temporary US cemeteries in the region (18 in all)³⁶³ were

³⁵⁸ IWGC, 1946b, p. 3; 1947, p. 22; Sparks, 2009, pp. 127, 136

³⁵⁹ IWGC, 1948, p. 13; 1949, p. 27; 1952, pp. 33–34. The IWGC records for progress on, and completion dates of, cemeteries in the region are ambiguous, and it is very difficult to establish when exactly individual cemeteries were in fact completed

³⁶⁰ IWGC, 1950, pp. 9, 30; 1952, pp. 15, 43–44; 1955a, p. 45; 1955b, pp. 34, 54; 1958, pp. 64–65, 74

³⁶¹ Steere, 1951, pp. 54–60

³⁶² ABMC, 1960, pp. 14, 16–17



Figure 74

USAAF and a SAAF grave at Kilo 151 Cemetery, Alam el Mireibet. None of these US airmen are listed amongst those buried in the US Military Cemetery at Carthage so presumably their remains were repatriated (photo: Lloyd Rodgers)

deemed suitable for a permanent cemetery and instead, in 1948, a new cemetery at Carthage was established, into which 39 per cent of US burials originally made in North Africa³⁶⁴ and elsewhere in the Middle East were concentrated. Construction of the Carthage cemetery was completed in 1960.³⁶⁵ Ongoing active official interest in the cemetery and its dead, however, was demonstrated as recently as 2022, when a memorandum of understanding was signed between the US and Tunisia, which will allow the US to exhume and repatriate for identification an unspecified number of the cemetery's unidentified dead.³⁶⁶

³⁶³ Steere, 1951, pp. 50, 52, 60 (Four in Morocco, three in Algeria and 11 in Tunisia)

³⁶⁴ There were US plots in both Libya (Benghazi) and Egypt (at Alam el Mireibet) (Peek, 1944; Schramm, this volume, p. 226)

³⁶⁵ ABMC, 1960, pp. 4, 14

³⁶⁶ Liebermann, 2022

France's dead from the North African campaign were buried both in UK and Dominion cemeteries (notably El Alamein), and in designated French cemeteries. For the Free French, the principal architect of the latter was Wally's reckless French colleague, Colonel Mallet, who early on established "permanent" cemeteries on the battlefield at Bir Hakeim (1943) (**Figure 75**), and at Takrouna in Tunisia.³⁶⁷ Owing to its out of the way position, however, the cemetery at Bir Hakeim was soon deemed unviable and in 1952 was removed to Tobruk where the battle's dead were reburied alongside a handful of Free French soldiers who had died thereabouts earlier in the campaign. These were joined 12 years later by the Free French dead from Kufra Oasis.³⁶⁸ Tobruk thus became the sole designated French war cemetery in Libya. Later, the French war cemetery at Gammarth, first established in 1944, became the main French military/war cemetery in Tunisia, when between 1965 and 1971, French military dead from WWII and other periods, formerly interred in 14 Tunisian cemeteries, were concentrated there.³⁶⁹ Gammarth was the last allied war cemetery in North Africa to be completed.

The imperatives and issues that applied to the campaign's allied dead, applied to its German and Italian dead as well—except

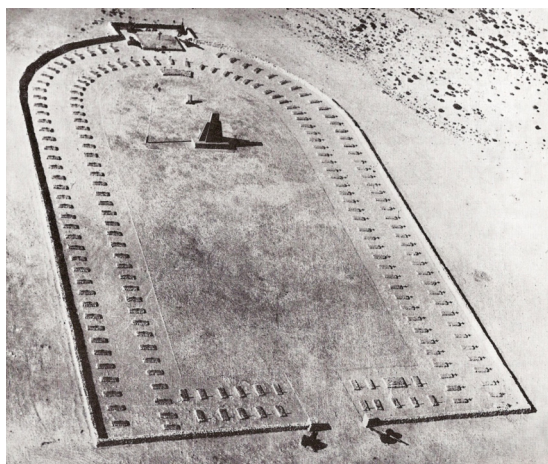


Figure 75
The Free French
cemetery at Bir
Hakeim (photo:
unknown)



Figure 76

South African personnel the German cemetery at Mersa Matruh (photo: Arthur Gleadall)

that neither the Germans nor the Italians retained control of the battlefield (**Figure 76**) and until the conclusion of the war their dead became the responsibility allied forces operating in the region. UK War Office and DGRE protocols regarding enemy dead were explicit: they were to be treated in the same way as allied dead but concentrated in axis cemeteries, “in special enemy plots...”, not side by side with allied troops and “never, never [...] in the same grave as an allied soldier”,³⁷⁰ and this is what happened. At El Alamein, they were concentrated on Hill 33, including those originally located in the UK and Dominion cemetery there (**Figure 13**, right);³⁷¹ in the

³⁶⁷ FFL, 2011

³⁶⁸ Ministère des Armées, n.d c; Pallud, 2012, p. 559

³⁶⁹ Ministère des Armées, n.d b

³⁷⁰ DGRE, 1944, section XIII; War Office, 1939, pp. 48, 118

³⁷¹ Caccia-Dominioni, 1966, pp. 260, 267–268; Dixon *et al.*, 1943

Acroma area, at El Mrassas,³⁷² and so on. With the closing down of Central Mediterranean Graves Registration and Enquiries operations in the Middle East, however, they were effectively abandoned. What happened next was up to the Germans and Italians, and the host countries.

The curation of the campaign's German and Italian dead post war followed a similar trajectory to that of its UK and Dominion dead, only later. In 1948, Italy's *Commissariato Generale per le Oneranze ai Caduti in Guerra* or *Onorcaduti* assumed responsibility for German and Italian cemeteries in Egypt and resumed the concentration of the dead from minor cemeteries and the battlefield. With the establishment of the German Federal Republic, a *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* agent was appointed for the region,³⁷³ and between 1951 and 1953, a *Volksbund* team in Libya recovered, and concentrated at Tobruk, 5350 German dead (at the same time recovering 187 allied and 100 Italian dead),³⁷⁴ before transferring to Egypt, where up to February 1954, the combined missions recovered and concentrated the remains of over 3281 German and Italian (as well as further allied) dead.³⁷⁵ During these concentrations, the identities of many Germans and Italians that had gone astray, owing to the incomplete information stamped on German dog-tags,³⁷⁶ and a misunderstanding of Italian names by UK and Dominion troops,³⁷⁷ were recovered. Ultimately the campaign's German dead were concentrated into five "permanent" cemeteries across the region, Tobruk (1955), El Alamein (1959), then, after considerable delays obtaining the necessary agreements from the host nations, Bordj Cedria in Tunisia (1977), Ben M'Sik in Morocco (late 70s), and Dely-Ibrahim in Algeria (1986), while the campaign's Italian dead were concentrated at El Alamein (also 1959), where they remain, and Tripoli (1955–58) and four cemeteries in Tunisia, from which they were subsequently removed to Bari's *Sacrario dei Caduti d'Oltremare* (in 1962–63 and 1972).³⁷⁸

"Their name liveth for evermore"—the ideal of perpetuity

For the 20th-century, the commitment of the state to maintain these cemeteries in perpetuity was summed-up by Winston Churchill in

a 1920 British House of Commons debate on the IWGC, “The cemeteries...” he said, “will be supported and sustained by the wealth of this great nation and Empire, as long as we remain a nation and an Empire, and there is no reason at all why, in periods as remote from our own as we ourselves are from the Tudors, the graveyards in France of this Great War, shall not remain an abiding and supreme memorial to the efforts and the glory of the British Army, and the sacrifices made in the great cause [WWI]”.³⁷⁹ The commitment is restated explicitly in the recent literature of several of the former combatants.³⁸⁰

Its origins lie in the middle of the 19th-century, prior to which war dead tended either to be abandoned in the field or buried in mass, usually unmarked graves.³⁸¹ What prompted it exactly is uncertain,

³⁷² 21 Graves Registration Unit, 1944

³⁷³ Ottokar Pauer 1950 (Caccia-Dominioni, 1966, p. 273)

³⁷⁴ VDK, 1961, p. 6; n.d, p. 12

³⁷⁵ Caccia-Dominioni, 1966, pp. 275–76

³⁷⁶ McGuirk, 1987, p. 71

³⁷⁷ Caccia-Dominioni, 1966, pp. 267–68

³⁷⁸ Formiconi, 2021, pp. 165–66. In addition to Hill 33 (Tel el Eisa) at El Alamein, Caccia-Dominioni, refers to 14 cemeteries in Egypt “left in perfect condition” by Italians seconded to 25 GCU (1966, pp. 265, 269). Specific sites in that country mentioned as “concentration cemeteries” include Matruh Axis (Dixon *et al.*, 1943) and Tel el Eisa. In Libya they include Bardia (Dixon *et al.*, 1943), Derna (IWGC, 1943, p. 9), el Mrassas and Tobruk (Caccia-Dominioni, 1966, p. 274), from which the Italian dead were later removed to Tripoli. Other identifiable axis cemeteries and plots in the region are of course known, but not certainly used by the allies for the concentration/reburial of German and Italian dead. These included, in the El Alamein area, Abd el Rahman, Deir el Harra, and Wally’s Qattara Road and MR 8609 2587 cemeteries (see also **Appx 5**); and elsewhere in Egypt, Amiriya, El Tahag (on the Suez Canal), Geneifa, and Moascar; and in Libya, Capuzzo (2 cemeteries), Halfaya Pass, and the Tobruk Roadhouse hospital (Caccia-Dominioni, 1966; Conte, 2012, p. 74; this volume, pp. 255, 265). “Temporary” German cemeteries in Tunisia later concentrated into Bordj Cedria included Nassen (Cap Bon), Bizerta, La Mornaghia, El M’Dou, Mateur and Sfax (VDK, n.d). Temporary Italian cemeteries in Tunisia included Chebedda, Bizerta, Tebouldou and Sidi el Hani (Formiconi, 2021, p. 166)

³⁷⁹ Churchill, 1920

³⁸⁰ ABMC, n.d; CWGC, 2021, pp. 4–5, 38; Ministère des Armées, n.d a

but very likely it results from the coming together of three factors: the inclusion amongst the dead of large numbers of volunteers and (later) conscripts, who were of a higher status than professional soldiers, and therefore deemed worthy of both record and reverent burial;³⁸² the fighting of wars at home and the prompt reporting of distant conflicts, so that those who died in them were neither out of sight nor of mind; and a perceived need to assert a political identity, in this case through the segregation and appropriation of particular war dead.³⁸³ In the US, during and after its civil war, the result was a series of incremental laws and appropriations which first established National Cemeteries for Union war dead (1862),³⁸⁴ then enclosed and provided gravestones for these (1867, 1873),³⁸⁵ and finally made similar provision for the dead of the Confederacy (1906, 1929).³⁸⁶ For mainland Europe, it was a clause in the Treaty of Frankfurt (1871), between France and Prussia, which provided for the maintenance of each other's war graves on each other's territories, and then in 1915, the passing of the "*sepulture perpetuelle*" law in France, which provided both for the individual burial of soldiers and the maintenance of their graves by the State in perpetuity.³⁸⁷ For the UK, whose wars continued to be fought out of sight, it was a proper, if retrospective, record of the dead of the second Boer War (1901–04).³⁸⁸ The long-term maintenance of the military cemeteries and monuments established was implicit. Thus by the time the ABMC, the IWGC, the *Onorcaduti* and the *Volksbund* were established in the 20th-century, the principal of perpetuity was set in stone.

That said, the curation of the dead continued to be pragmatic. Both UK and Dominion, and German dead were refused repatriation.

³⁸¹ Mosse, 1990, p. 45

³⁸² Mosse, 1990, pp. 9–10, 17–18

³⁸³ e.g. Grant, 2005; Mosse, 1990, p. 19

³⁸⁴ Steere, 1953a

³⁸⁵ Steere, 1953a; 1953b

³⁸⁶ Mollan, 2003

³⁸⁷ Longworth, 1985 [2010], p. 11–12; Ministère des Armées, n.d a

³⁸⁸ Chadwick, 1981, p. 33

Naval dead continued to be buried at sea. Some cemeteries were prioritised over others and the dead in these latter, systematically concentrated—primarily for financial reasons. Individual graves and even small cemeteries considered irrecoverable³⁸⁹ or (later) unmaintainable were abandoned and the names of the men buried in them inscribed elsewhere. Impermanent accommodations were made between combatant, and cemetery host nations.³⁹⁰ There has been, therefore, and no doubt there will continue to be retrenchment from the ideal of perpetuity.

Architecture

The architecture of WWII's permanent war cemeteries, including those in North Africa, was conditioned by three things: cost, the physical environment and a national or institutional architectural vision, pre-existing and unchallenged in the case of the allies,³⁹¹ and challenged and evolving in the case of the Germans and Italians.

For the UK and Dominion cemeteries, it was agreed early on that formulae established for cemetery design after WWI would be retained.³⁹² It is not perhaps surprising therefore that the Principal Architect chosen by the IWGC for Egypt and North Africa, Hubert Worthington, was a WWI veteran, and former associate of Edwin Luytens, himself an IWGC Principal Architect and designer of the Commission's Stone of Remembrance, the Cenotaph, and the Thiepval Memorial. Worthington's North African cemeteries, like most IWGC cemeteries, are dominated by the altar-like Stone of Remembrance, the Cross of Sacrifice, on which is mounted an inverted "Crusader" sword, and—above all—the many ranks of near identical, non-sectarian IWGC gravestones fashioned from Portland Stone (**Figures 73 and 77–79**). Their locations, their high

³⁸⁹ Latter, 1944

³⁹⁰ The land on which the *Sacrario Militare di El Alamein* is located was leased for 99 years only (Formiconi, 2021, p. 158)

³⁹¹ Longworth, 1985 [2020], pp. 178–179; Worthington, 1943, p. 3

³⁹² Longworth, 1985 [2010], p. 163



Figures 77 and 78
CWGC cemeteries at El Alamein (in 1984) and Knightsbridge-Acroma (in 1963)

walls, intended to keep out the desert sands (**Figure 78**), and their horticultural design (**Figure 73**), which—in the desert at least—was of necessity quite distinct, stand out. (By contrast, the Medjez-el-Bab cemetery in temperate northern Tunisia does not). But they remain pre-eminently IWGC, pre-eminently British, and the new architecture, though not without merit, at best a tinkering around the edges of a pre-existing earlier 20th-century conception.



Figure 79

Queen Elizabeth II with Prince Phillip laying a wreath at the Tobruk Stone of Remembrance (photo: unknown)

It was not of course IWGC cemeteries only that projected a national identity. Those of all the combatant nations did. The dead, who had formerly lain side-by-side, were claimed as national property and clearly distinguished.

Like IWGC cemeteries, both the French and US reused nationally distinct WWI gravestone materials (concrete and marble, respectively) and—in their cases, varying sectarian—gravestone

designs.³⁹³ Additionally, in French cemeteries in Tunisia, including that of the Free French at Takrouna, graves were embellished with French Army Adrian helmets (not the British Mk II helmet actually worn by Free French troops in the region), while the graves in all three French North African cemeteries were surrounded by neat curbs, a feature also employed in WWII French cemeteries in Italy.



Figure 80

The Free French cemetery at Takrouna (photo: US Army)

The design for the ABMC's Carthage cemetery included features such as a non-sectarian chapel, a visitor reception area and battle maps, different in design from those in other US military cemeteries, but paralleling them nonetheless.³⁹⁴ It is also evident from its use of expensive, non-local materials that money was no object, something which cannot be said of either its UK and Dominion or French counterparts.

Germany's North African war cemeteries are characterised by their depersonalisation of the dead, which contrasts starkly with both

allied forms, and *Wehrmacht* practice in the field, which insisted upon, and often involved the construction of highly elaborate, individual graves (**Figure 76**),³⁹⁵ by the widespread use in them of rusticated stone, and by their stylised imagery and blending of German national and—in its North African cemeteries—local/regional motifs.

These features are exemplified in the Tobruk and El Alamein *Totenburgen* (**Figures 81 and 82**), bold castle-like mausolea of Third Reich rather than WWI antecedence, designed by Robert Tischler, the *Volksbund*'s chief architect throughout that period,³⁹⁶ which were justified by the post-war *Volksbund* on the grounds of the threat posed to unenclosed graves by the desert environment.³⁹⁷ The Tobruk mausoleum, though interpreted as Hohenstaufen in inspiration (Kappel, 2017),³⁹⁸ recalls extant Ottoman Forts in the region,³⁹⁹ and incorporates stone (basalt) brought from Germany, while the El Alamein mausoleum, which is explicitly modelled on Castel del Monte, Frederick II Hohenstaufen's hunting lodge on the Mergè plateau in Apulia, incorporates such features as an Arab portal, Byzanto-Coptic mosaics, eagles and an Egyptian obelisk, also in German basalt (**Figures 83 and 84**).⁴⁰⁰

By the 1970s, *Totenburgen* had fallen out of favour,⁴⁰¹ and in Tunisia's Bordj Cedria, we see something different. Its architect, Dieter Oesterlen attempted to reconcile the supposed need for crypt burial with the open architectural space of his rather better North Italian Futa Pass cemetery, producing a series of open but tamer,

³⁹³ ABMC, 1960, p. 18; Biraben, 2018

³⁹⁴ ABMC, 1960, pp. 7–12, 18

³⁹⁵ Janz, 2017; McGuirk, 1987, p. 71

³⁹⁶ Tischler, a party member, was responsible for similar *Totenburgen* in immediately pre-war Italy (Pordoi, Quero), Silesia (the Annaberg, Waldenburg/Wałbrzych) and Yugoslavia (Bitola)

³⁹⁷ VDK, 1961, p. 7

³⁹⁸ Kappel (2017) suggests Castello Maniace in Syracuse and Castello Ursino in Catania e.g. Apollonia, Mjazem, Qasr Libya, etc.

⁴⁰⁰ VDK, 1961, pp. 35–43

⁴⁰¹ Urmson, 2017



Figures 81 and 82

The Tobruk and El Alamein *Totenburgen* (photos: VDK, 1961, and Philip Hassan)



Figure 83
 “Byzanto-Coptic” mosaic in the El Alamein *Totenburg* (photo: Philip Hassan)

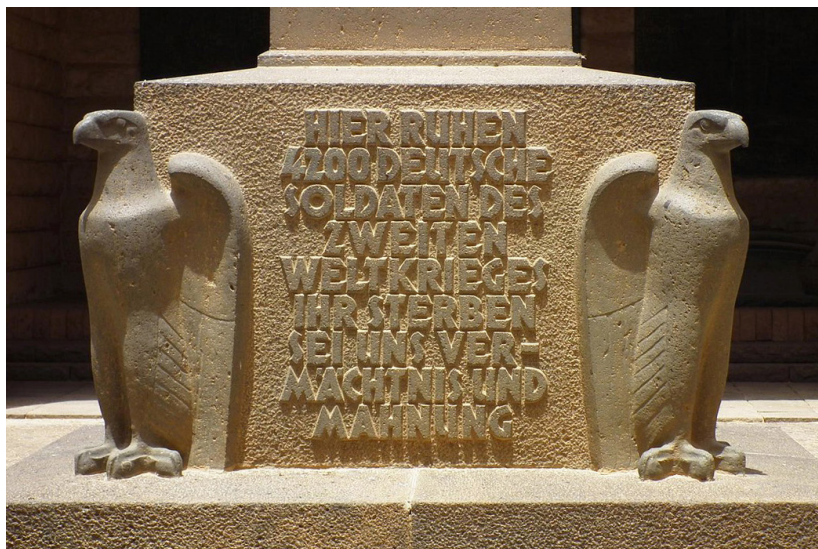


Figure 84

Germanic eagles (?referencing Horus) at the base of a basalt pyramid in the centre of the El Alamein Totenburg (photo: Philip Hassan)

more intimate spaces. However, Bordj Cedria too depersonalised the dead, enclosing them in monolithic, granite-clad ossuaries, and in it once again we see the juxtaposition of local and non-local stone, stone typical of German war cemeteries internationally, and embellishments including a map of former German war cemeteries fashioned from local tiles.⁴⁰²

Finally, the Italian ossuary or *Sacrario* at El Alamein by Paolo Caccia-Dominioni,⁴⁰³ dominated by an octagonal tower, is Italian fascist in its use of the tower motif and domestic Italian in the design of its individual burial niches (Figures 85 and 86),⁴⁰⁴ while the architect's use of arches at El Alamein and in the Tripoli concentration cemetery was inescapably late Italian Colonial Modern.⁴⁰⁵

Intended And Unintended Meanings

These cemeteries and the architectural vision manifest in them were



Figure 85

The Sacrario di El Alamein (photo: Philip Hassan)

the product of four quite different things: wartime psychological manipulation—covering up the realities of war, and the “proper” treatment of the dead, being perceived as good for morale at home and in the field; sentiment, a perceived need in the survivors for what we would today call “closure”;⁴⁰⁶ an aspiration to promote national identity and (varying) national ideals;⁴⁰⁷ and logistics and economy, it being easier and cheaper (at least in the short term) to bury the dead in concentration cemeteries in or near the battlefield, than to bring them home. Except historically, of these, only the third retains much

⁴⁰² Bonkat, 2015; VDK, 2009, 18

⁴⁰³ Conte, 2012; Ministero della Difesa, 2015

⁴⁰⁴ cf. *Sacrari Militari* at Montello (Nervesa della Bataglia), Monte Pasubio, Oslavia, Pocol and Rovereto

⁴⁰⁵ Formiconi, 2021, pp. 160–61, 165; e.g. Fuller, 2007 [2010], chapter 5

⁴⁰⁶ e.g. Kenyon, 1918

⁴⁰⁷ Longworth, 1985 [2010], p. 28; Mosse, 1990

relevance, and for most of us, even this is fading. But the cemeteries of all the combatant nations continue to be meaningful, in both positive and negative, and intended and unintended ways.

The war cemetery, like the battlefield itself, and surviving portable material culture, provides a point of psychological contact between the past and the present.⁴⁰⁸ Coming upon, walking amongst the graves of the war dead, predominantly young men shot, blown



Figure 86
Individual burial niches in the
Sacramento di El Alamein (photo:
Philip Hassan)

to pieces and burnt to death because of a failure of politics and society, is a potent experience. Perhaps a 100,000 men—UK and Dominion, Czech, French, German, Italian, Libyan, Polish, US—died during the North African campaign,⁴⁰⁹ not many perhaps compared to the numbers of those who died on the Western Front during WWI, but huge nonetheless; and the cemeteries in which they lie are central to realising and understanding the human implications of

that campaign. Irrespective of their appearance, they are not polite English churchyards or medieval castles, they are war cemeteries, and those who lie in them—the majority disinterested innocents—were obliged to serve and deliberately killed. Your grandfather, my father's best friend (most of those who died had no descendants), someone's husband, someone's child, someone's brother. The graves of these men (and occasionally women), tragic 80 years ago, now provide a stark warning of humanity's potential for self-destruction. They are moreover part of the Western World's cultural heritage in the Mediterranean.

They are also now themselves historical relics, and some—if not all—have intrinsic artistic and architectural merit. A politically neutral architectural historian would regret the destruction of the *Totenburgen* no less than, for example, that of some of the better examples of neighbouring Libya's Italian Colonial Modern. But they are not themselves politically neutral—not as architecture, nor as war cemeteries.

Most overtly contentious are Tischler's *Totenburgen*. As well as being Adolf Hitler's preferred burial place for Germany's war dead, for many, *Totenburgen* remain too suggestive of National Socialist ideals for comfort,⁴⁰⁸ while—in North Africa—their referencing of castles of the Hohenstaufen period is seen as a wilful invocation of past German greatness, and thus also problematic.⁴⁰⁹ The same sensitivity to these sites' Third Reich antecedence is manifest in a change in name for them in *Volksbund* literature between the 1960s and the present, from *Ehrenstätten* (places of honour),⁴¹⁰ a traditional German name for war cemeteries, to *Soldatenfriedhöfe*, *Friedhöfen* (places of peace or rest) being a traditional German name for cemeteries, or the even wholly neutral *Kriegsgräberstätten* (war

⁴⁰⁸ Seager Thomas, 2022, p. 2; Schofield, 2005, pp. 92–98

⁴⁰⁹ Clodfelter, 2008, p. 477

⁴¹⁰ Kappel, 2017; Mosse, 1990, p. 85–86; Urmson, 2017

⁴¹¹ Kappel, 2017

⁴¹² VDK, 1961

cemeteries).⁴¹³ Soldiers of the *Wehrmacht*, even those who died during the North African campaign, which is generally agreed to have been waged with some honour,⁴¹⁴ must not today be described as honourable, while German art and architecture of the period, even when good, is automatically deemed bad. (This contrasts with Italian architecture of period, much of which has now been rehabilitated).

It is not just Germany's North African war cemeteries, however, that have a political identity. The fact that Western nations freely used the region as a battleground, that they extracted from what were then weak host countries territorial concessions for cemeteries to which they applied Western rules and symbolism and then claimed as "for ever England"—or wherever—is an implicit challenge to the sovereignty both of the host nations and their peoples. This applies particularly to the cemeteries of the UK, France and Italy, countries which previously had colonial interests in the region. (In its former Tripoli war cemetery, Italy brought together the remains of those who died in Libya during its colonial wars and those who died during WWII, establishing an unambiguous equivalence between the two).⁴¹⁵ But it is relevant to them all—even ABMC cemeteries, the intention of which, it has been argued, was to establish for the US, an aesthetic, spiritual and political foothold abroad, as much as to memorialise the country's war dead.⁴¹⁶

The future

The Portland Stone used in CWGC cemeteries in North Africa (and elsewhere), is a beautiful stone and easily worked, but objects fashioned from it—such as the Stone of Remembrance—will not, *contra* Winston Churchill, "certainly be in existence 2,000 or 3,000 years hence".⁴¹⁷ Portland Stone is soft, and vulnerable to wear from windblown dust. It is porous and will absorb water and dissolved salts, rendering it vulnerable to freeze-thaw processes and salt recrystallisation, both of which can cause its surface to flake and crumble. It is inhomogeneous, containing many fossils and other

mineral grains, which expand and contract at different rates, also causing it to flake and crumble. It is a limestone, and can be dissolved by acids, such as those in humanly-generated atmospheric pollution. And because it is beautiful, and easily worked, it may be selectively robbed by people. Sollum-Halfaya war cemetery located on the long-closed border between Egypt and Libya may not be particularly threatened by acids from vehicle exhaust but it is on the edge of the desert and near the sea and is threatened by sand blasting and salt. Heliopolis by contrast, which since its construction has been enveloped by Cairo's urban sprawl, is far from any source of marine salt but is certainly threatened by humanly-generated atmospheric pollution. El Alamein, which is currently being encroached upon by the city of New Alamein, will very likely fall victim to *all* of these; likewise the CWGC cemeteries of Alexandria, Tobruk and Tripoli. Similar issues, varying depending upon their precise locations and the materials used in them (basalt, reinforced concrete, limestone, marble, tile, wood), apply to the cemeteries of all the combatant nations.⁴¹⁸

Also under threat are cemetery locales. This threat takes three forms: the re-purposing of the land on which they are located, for pragmatic or political reasons; vandalism; and assault upon the sensory environment, which is central to the war cemetery's current role as a place of contemplation, and any future role for it as a tourist/heritage site. From North Africa, we have already examples of all three—the de facto expulsion of the Italian dead from Italy's Tripoli war cemetery, physical attacks on CWGC cemeteries in Egypt⁴¹⁹ and

⁴¹³ Schrader, 2018; VDK, 2009

⁴¹⁴ e.g. Kitchen, 2009, p. 10; Bierman and Smith, 2002

⁴¹⁵ Delplano, 2023, pp. 7–8. A potent analogy for such an intention can be found in the Argentinian refusal to repatriate its dead from the Falkland Islands after the Falkland Islands War on the grounds that they were already in Argentina

⁴¹⁶ Robin, 1995, p. 55

⁴¹⁷ Churchill, 1920

⁴¹⁸ e.g. Schrader, 2018

⁴¹⁹ During the 1956 “Suez Crisis” (Longworth, 1985 [2010], p. 216)



Figure 87

The deliberate slighting of British and former Dominion war graves in Benghazi War Cemetery filmed and posted online by a member of an Islamist militia. The Cross of Sacrifice was also destroyed

Libya (**Figure 87**), and the encroachment of modern development on Heliopolis, formerly in the desert, but now hedged around by modern apartments, El Alamein (**Figure 73**), and Tobruk, where the German mausoleum is now dominated by an oil refinery (**Figure 88**).

And it is not just the fabric and the experience of these cemeteries that is under threat, it is their meaning. Currently North Africa's war cemeteries have relatively few visitors, so these do not pose a significant physical threat, but, increasingly, they do pose a conceptual one, which may increase the cemeteries' vulnerability to some of the aforementioned physical ones. The majority of visitors to these cemeteries today are tourists or local people with no personal connection to the dead in them. Their relationship to them can be compared to that of, for example, that of a visitor to the Colosseum in Rome. They may be awed by the conception,

interested in the period of history to which they belong, titillated by proximity of mass death (the elephant in the room in all discussions of war-related tourism), or just tourists checking-off must sees on an itinerary, but to the human tragedy inherent in them, most are *personally* indifferent. With their interest, therefore, what was uniquely valuable, is devalued, and becomes instead just another heritage resource, in competition for interest, space and funding with every other heritage resource, including many with a more universal, or a more contemporary appeal.

The question to be asked of these cemeteries today, therefore, is not will they or wont they survive, but when and how they will disappear? Till now they have relied for their survival on an assumption, a belief, that because they are *military* cemeteries and because in them lie our honoured dead, they are uniquely untouchable. For the reasons outlined above, however, this can no longer be taken for



Figure 88

The Tobruk *Totenburg* (upper left), today dominated by a nearby oil refinery (photo: Google Earth)

granted, and if any are to survive in the long-term, strong cases will have to be made for them, which fully consider their contemporary cultural, political and social, as well as their historical heritage contexts.

In order to qualify for preservation, a heritage resource has to meet one or more of several standard criteria, which qualify it as important or of special interest. Typically, these include authenticity, originality, rarity, representativeness or uniqueness, the possession of social value, historical interest and usefulness (e.g. for educational purposes).⁴²⁰ Their preservation also has to be viable.

Collectively and individually, the extent to which these cemeteries fulfil these criteria varies. Collectively, long-term preservation is probably not viable and would be very difficult to justify. All of course remain more or less original and have social value—in so far as they are places of contemplation and reminders of the implications of modern warfare—but they are not rare or unique, their historical associations vary and for educational purposes we hardly need to preserve every one. Strong cases for preservation, however, can be made for individual cemeteries. The two *Totenburgen*, for example, are unique in North Africa, rare generally, and, owing to their Third Reich antecedence, a type elsewhere at risk to the ravages of political correctness. In Africa, the ABMC cemetery at Carthage and the Italian *Sacrario* at El Alamein, are also unique. The El Alamein, Sollum-Halfaya, Tobruk, Knightsbridge-Acroma and several Tunisian cemeteries are associated with particular battles and therefore of heightened historical importance. Cemeteries close to centres of population may be particularly useful for educational purposes.

Safest are probably the three El Alamein cemeteries—because of their historical importance, but also because the city of New Alamein is a desert city and can grow out as easily as in. Most vulnerable are probably the CWGC cemeteries in Alexandria, Heliopolis and

⁴²⁰ e.g. DOE, 1990, annex 4; Schofield, 1990, chapter 4

⁴²¹ CWGC, 1970, pp. 15–16; 1973, p. 23; 1982, pp. 13–14

Tripoli. As “base” as opposed to “battlefield” cemeteries, they lack the historical associations and wider educational value of, for example, the El Alamein cemeteries. They are also “expensive”. The land on which they are located is valuable, and its loss to the state potentially greater than the value of the cemeteries themselves (politically, as tourist and educational resources, etc.), while, because of their locations, and the threats associated with these, they are more than usually burdensome to the curatorial authority, the CWGC.

A likely trajectory is suggested by the periods of revolutionary government in Egypt (under Gamal Abdel Nasser) and Libya (under Gaddafi), governments that did not feel bound by pre-existing agreements and were largely indifferent to Western sensibilities surrounding their war dead. During these, WWII war cemeteries in Alexandria, Benghazi and Tripoli were targeted for redevelopment (the plan was to move the Alexandrian dead to El Alamein).⁴²¹ All of these threats—except that to Italy’s Tripoli cemetery—were weathered. Another time they may not be.

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